

SOFTWARE
FAQ

Q I have a desktop PC and a notebook PC. Can I install the same software on both machines?

A The answer depends on the software you're using. Most software is licensed for only a single installation, which means you need to buy two copies (one for each computer). However, not all software licences are so restrictive.

If you have Microsoft Office, you'll see that the licence permits you to install it on one desktop and one notebook PC, so in effect you're getting two copies of the software. This doesn't mean you can use it on two desktop PCs though; for that you have to buy two copies of the software.

In general, if you can't find any information that expressly permits you to install the software twice, you'll have to buy two copies.

Q I've just bought a computer but I'm worried that its specification doesn't match the one in the advert. In particular I think the processor might have been replaced with a cheaper one that has been overclocked. Is there any way of checking my hardware?

A Windows has some default tools that will tell you the speed of your processor. Right-click on My Computer and view the diagnostic information that comes up, which will tell you the speed of your processor and how much memory you have. However, it's not perfect. The amount of memory it displays is the amount of free memory, so if you have onboard graphics the count will be lower, as some of it is reserved for the graphics. For example, a 512MB PC with 64MB of onboard graphics will be reported as having 448MB of RAM.

The processor information is just as misleading, as it reports only the type of processor and the speed at which it's running. For more detailed information download CPU-Z from www.cpuid.com.

This is a free tool that provides detailed hardware information including the exact model of your processor. When you know the model you can use the 786 processors chart (see <http://users.erols.com/chare/786.htm>) to find out the clock speed of your processor and compare it with the speed Windows says it's running at. If you click on the SPD tab, you can select each memory slot in order to find out how much RAM is really installed.

david@computershopper.co.uk



REVIEW MUSIC PRODUCTION SOFTWARE

STEINBERG
Cubase SE3

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £105 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.sub.co.uk

DETAILS www.steinberg.de

There's no shortage of affordable software for making music, but most focuses on composition, providing a library of samples and an array of software synths. Cubase SE has neither of these, although Steinberg's Studio Case II bundles SE3 with a sextet of simple but excellent-quality synths for £199 including VAT. However, what SE lacks in composing tools, it makes up for in its recording and mixing capabilities. Based on the music-production heavyweight Cubase SX, it closely emulates the hardware found in a recording studio.

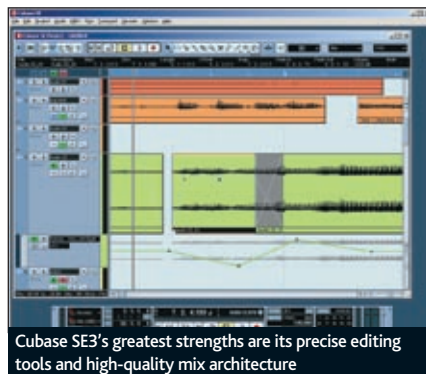
This means that as a recording and mixing tool, it's extremely flexible and powerful. It also means that it can be confusing for inexperienced users. Ultimately, though, if you want professional-level control over your mixes, you need to get used to the controls this kind of software provides.

The main differences between SE3, the mid-price SL3 and the flagship SX3 are the restrictions to the number of elements you can use in a project. In SE3, these limitations are 48 audio channels, five insert effect plug-ins per channel, eight auxiliary effects, eight group channels, 16 instrument plug-ins and eight physical inputs and outputs. In practice, only the most ambitious users are likely to hit these boundaries, and they're far more likely to run out of processing power than plug-in slots.

PAST MASTERS

The previous version of Cubase SE had various other omissions compared with SX and SL, but these were largely due to the fact that SE was based on the original SX rather than the then-current SX2. The fact that this release is called SE3 suggests that it is thoroughly up to date, but many of the features introduced in SX2 and SX3 remain absent here. There's no stacked recording, which helps with compiling multiple takes into a single best version. Also omitted are In-Place Editing, which makes MIDI editable from the main Arrange view, and the RoomWorks plug-in, a superior-quality reverb effect.

Perhaps it's fair to exclude these features at this price, but it seems a bit stingy to omit SX's unlimited undo – SE3 can undo only the last 10 actions. We're even more disappointed that there's no Audio Warp. This feature, introduced in SX3, lets



Cubase SE3's greatest strengths are its precise editing tools and high-quality mix architecture



By and large, Cubase SE3 looks and behaves exactly like the £499 Cubase SX3



The mixing tools give high-quality results but are likely to baffle inexperienced users

you re-time and re-pitch audio parts independently of each other to make them fit the tempo and key of the track. As many other low-cost music programs such as Acid Music (reviewed on page 58) have offered similar features for years, we don't think Steinberg would damage sales of its SX3 by including it. As it is, Cubase SE3 isn't a good choice for those who work mainly with sample libraries.

PLUG-IN AND PLAY

Still, the improvements Steinberg has made to SE3 are very welcome. The underlying audio engine is now the same as SX3's, running at 32-bit for superb audio fidelity. Full plug-in delay compensation eliminates timing errors introduced by the few milliseconds it takes for plug-ins to process audio streams. It's now possible to drag and drop MIDI data directly into the Arrange window, a feature that makes certain plug-ins such as Spectrasonic's Stylus RMX (reviewed in *What's New*, *Shopper* April 2005) much easier to use. Tracks can be packed into folders to make the Arrange window easier to manage, and the Track Inspector, which gives quick access to tracks' mix parameters, is now the new and improved version introduced in SX2.

SE3 is a rather sombre update, making it quicker to use and improving audio quality but offering no new creative tools. Those looking for a musical sketch pad with which to compose would be better off with Acid Music or spending more on Studio Case II. However, for songwriters and bands that want a high-quality recording and mixing tool for pre-written songs, SE3 is ideal.

Ben Pitt



Professional-quality audio production at a home-user's price



Recording studio emulation may confuse inexperienced users; no Audio Warp function

REQUIREMENTS Windows XP, 800MHz processor, 384MB RAM (2.8GHz, 512MB recommended), USB port for dongle

REVIEW PHOTO-EDITING SOFTWARE**ULEAD**
PhotoImpact 10

RATING ★★★★★

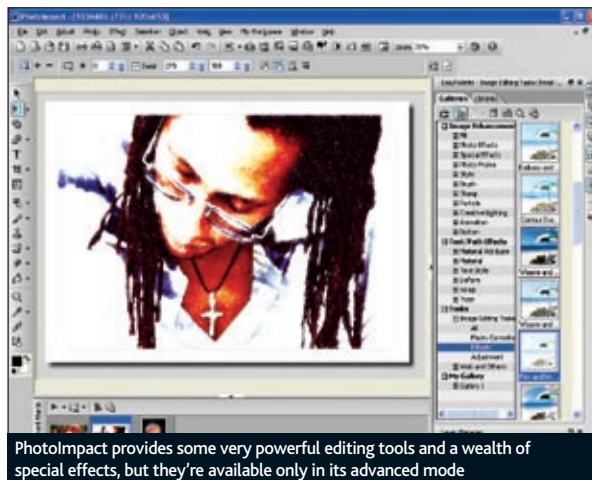
PRICE £44 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.misco.co.ukDETAILS www.ulead.co.uk

The biggest challenge for any low-cost photo-editing program is striking the right balance between powerful editing features and ease of use. That's clearly something Ulead has been concentrating on with this upgrade to its PhotoImpact software, as the list of new features can quite clearly be divided into two sections.

In the powerful category there are additions such as the new Object Extractor, which simplifies the task of selecting objects with a complex or finely detailed outline. When you select this command your photo is displayed in a new window that allows you to trace quickly around the outline of any object in the photo. Once that's done the program automatically homes in on the edges of that object in order to separate it from its background. This feature works surprisingly well and will definitely save a lot of time if you need to create montages or composite images containing elements from multiple photos.

Other additions include the ability to import images in the RAW file format (using the bundled Photo Explorer utility) and edit 16-bit images. There's also a new SmartCurves option that can automatically adjust the tonal curves that describe



PhotoImpact provides some very powerful editing tools and a wealth of special effects, but they're available only in its advanced mode

the distribution of light and dark pixels within an image. This is really high-end stuff that can baffle even professional Photoshop users, so Ulead is certainly providing value for money by including such features in a program that sells for under £50.

At this price Ulead clearly hopes to attract home users and hobbyists who may not have much experience of photo-editing work. This upgrade also caters for those users, but with slightly more mixed results. One of the biggest changes in this upgrade is the ability to choose from a number of different workspace layouts that provide different sets of tools. There's a basic workspace for beginners and an advanced workspace that provides access to the more powerful editing tools such as the Object Extractor. You can also select two other workspaces designed

for web graphics and general graphics and design work.

This is a good idea, but the problem with the basic photo-editing workspace is that, rather than providing additional help to explain how the tools work, Ulead simply hides a lot of the tools instead. There are some useful automatic options such as the ExpressFix command, which can automatically adjust a whole range of colour, brightness and focus settings all at once.

However, if you want to have a bit of fun with the program's special effects, you really need to switch to the advanced mode to see what's on offer. We'd also like to see some sort of context-sensitive help to

provide information about the various tools, rather than just leaving you to delve through the rather dense online help files.

PhotoImpact is certainly good value. However, Ulead needs to think a little more carefully about the help it gives to newcomers if it really wants to stand out from the many low-cost photo editors that are currently available.

Cliff Joseph

✓ Affordable and powerful photo-editing program

✗ Needs to provide more help and information on basic editing tasks

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98 or above, 500MHz processor, 128MB RAM, 600MB disk space. **Product code** ULE093

HOTLIST OFFICE SUITE**ABILITY SOFTWARE**
Ability Office 4

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE Professional Edition £50 inc VAT

(upgrade £25); Standard/Small Business

Edition £40 inc VAT (upgrade £20)

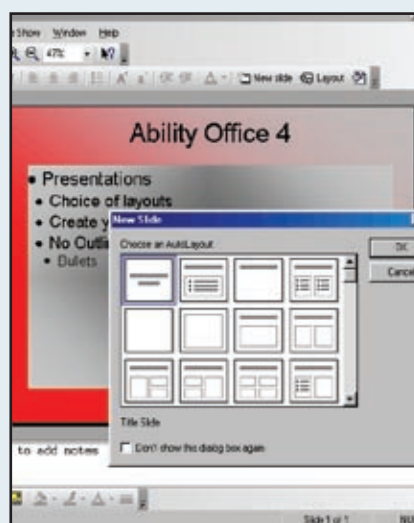
DETAILS www.ability.com

Buying an office suite doesn't necessarily mean spending a lot of money, as Ability shows us with its Office 4 suite. For just £50 for the Professional Edition, it undercuts the competition by a mile but still offers a functional package.

The latest version introduces the new Presentation program, which competes against Microsoft's PowerPoint. It's compatible with its competitor, bar a couple of features such as embedded video. This means that a few PowerPoint presentations won't open properly in Ability and you'll have to start your work from scratch. To facilitate this, Ability offers 20 slide layouts for slideshows.

The other big feature is Ability Mail. It's not included on the CD, but is available as a free download from the Ability website for registered users. It's the final piece in the puzzle for moving away from a Microsoft-based productivity suite.

Ability Office 4 also updates Ability Database. One of the strengths of the suite, the database



now provides easier form design and reporting. Ability Write has the welcome additions of Autocorrect, Autotext and Grammar Checker. These features put the application on a par with Microsoft Word.

For the price it's very good value, although we recommend downloading the trial version to make sure all the features you need are present.

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98 SE/Me/2000/XP, Pentium processor, 64MB RAM, 100MB disk space

HOTLIST VIDEO-EDITING SOFTWARE**SONY**
Vegas Movie Studio
+DVD Platinum Edition 6

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £99 inc VAT

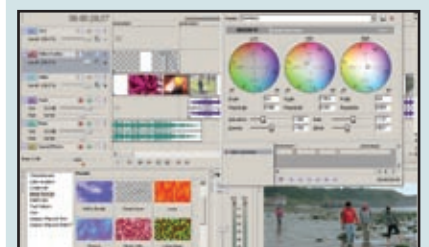
SUPPLIER SCV London 020 8418 1470

DETAILS www.sonymediasoftware.com

Platinum Edition is new to the Vegas family and adds support for High-Definition Video (HDV) cameras. With a range of new effects over the standard edition, including the excellent Colour Corrector, it's well worth the extra £15.

Movie Studio has finally caught up and even surpassed its rival, Adobe's Premier Elements.

REQUIREMENTS Windows 2000/XP, 800MHz processor, 256MB RAM, 200MB disk space. **Product code** SPVMSDV6000





REVIEW PHOTO-MANAGEMENT SOFTWARE

ACD SYSTEMS
ACDSee 8

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £30 inc VAT

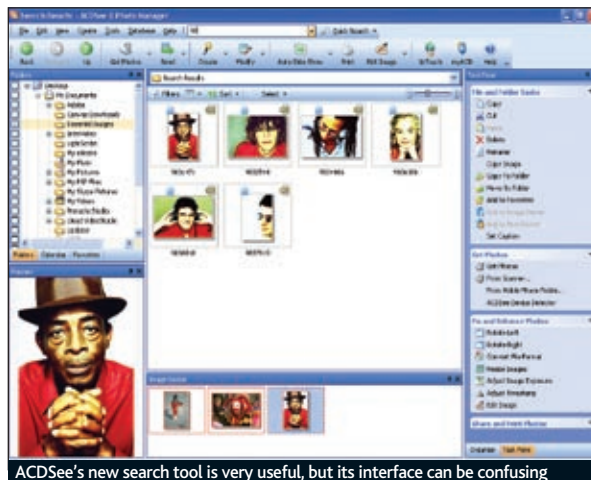
SUPPLIER Avanquest 01962 835053

DETAILS www.avanquest.co.uk

The last time we looked at the ACDSee Photo Manager it came as part of a suite of three different programs called the ACD PowerPack 7. The Photo Manager was an album program that enabled you to organise and sort through your collections of photos, and it came with two separate programs that provided basic photo-editing features and printing options. Those three programs have now been merged into a single product, and the price has been slashed from £67 to just £30.

The integration of all three programs into one is certainly a welcome move, as is the price reduction. ACDSee 8 also includes some useful new features, such as a Quick Search option that enables you to search for text in filenames, keywords associated with photos and category labels that you can assign to your images.

We like the improved HTML Album feature, which can help you turn a set of photos automatically into a web gallery that you can put on your website. The new version also includes improved options for saving and backing up your photo library, such as the Sync command that keeps copies of your photos in a separate folder elsewhere on a network or external storage device.



ACDSee's new search tool is very useful, but its interface can be confusing

For editing individual images ACDSee 8 includes a new Photo Repair tool, which enables you to remove blemishes such as scratches and tears on old photos or spots on the subject's skin. Individually these tools work quite well, although collectively they don't come anywhere near the sheer photo-editing power provided by rivals such as Paint Shop Pro and Photoshop Elements. To be fair, though, at just £30 ACDSee 8 is about half the price of those other programs, so it's a little unreasonable to criticise it for being less powerful.

On the other hand we feel entirely justified in disliking the program's interface. The editing mode is relatively straightforward, as it simply displays the chosen picture and a basic toolbar that contains the main editing tools. However, the main Photo Manager mode is a bit of a mess.

Your photos are previewed in the central part of the screen, while two sets of panels run down the left and right-hand sides of the screen. The Task pane on the right-hand side displays a list of options, such as the organise pane and the search pane, but when you select one of these options the interface seems to change almost at random to show different sets of panes and panels. When we tried to revert back to the original Task pane we found that the list of available options had changed – sometimes options vanished, and at other times new options appeared.

There's a reset layout option in the program's View menu, which

at least enables you to start again from scratch, but the musical chairs interface is not much fun to work with.

As a low-cost photo manager ACDSee 8 is worth buying if you don't want to shell out for one of its more expensive rivals. However, the interface really needs a makeover before we can recommend it without reservation.

Cliff Joseph

✓ Low-cost photo-management and editing software

✗ Clumsy interface; limited editing tools

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98 or above, 500MHz processor, 128MB RAM, 250MB disk space, internet connection required for product activation

HOTLIST ANTI-VIRUS SOFTWARE

F-SECURE
Anti-Virus 2005

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £26 inc VAT

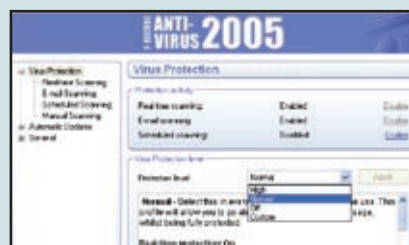
SUPPLIER F-Secure 01223 478800

DETAILS www.f-secure.com

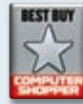
One of the cheapest anti-virus products on the market, F-Secure's Anti-Virus is also one of the best. Its interface is clean and easy to use, and when we downloaded infected emails its pop-up listed the viruses but didn't halt the rest of the download.

With excellent detection across the board, it's great value for money and worthy of our Best Buy award.

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98 or above, Pentium II processor, 128MB RAM, 30MB disk space



HOTLIST PC RECOVERY

INVOLUTION
RecoverPC

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £100 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.hacyonics.co.ukDETAILS www.recoverpc.com

When your PC goes catastrophically wrong and you can't even start Windows, RecoverPC can help. This PCI card fits into a free slot and lets you access a hidden partition. A few seconds later, you'll be able to restore your PC to a working state.

It's amazingly quick, works really well and is good value. But make sure you back up your documents regularly or they'll be overwritten.

REQUIREMENTS Free PCI slot. Product code 5060094150000



HOTLIST MUSIC PRODUCTION SOFTWARE

ABLETON
Live 5

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £299 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.dv247.comDETAILS www.ableton.com

Ableton Live is an extraordinary piece of software, designed to help you produce your live performance. Its excellent Session View lets you trigger recorded clips on the fly, making the software more of an instrument than a recording platform. If you plan to perform on stage, there's no better choice than Live.

REQUIREMENTS Windows 2000/XP, 600MHz processor, 512MB RAM. Product code 28683





REVIEW TECHNICAL ILLUSTRATION SOFTWARE

ACD SYSTEMS
Canvas X

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE: £90 inc VAT

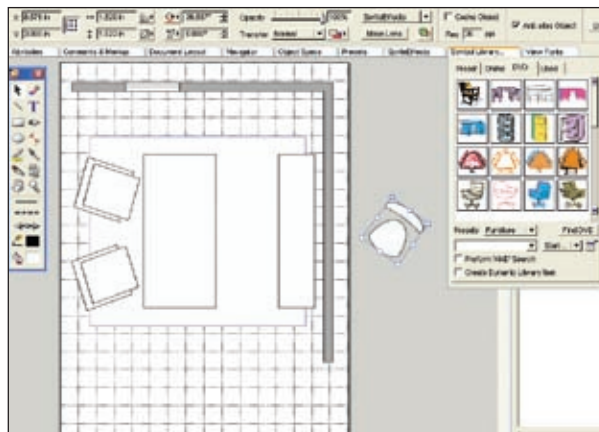
SUPPLIER Avanquest 01962 835053

DETAILS www.avanquest.co.uk

Canvas is rather an odd beast. For the past few years it has been passed from one software company to another, and recently it ended up with ACD Systems, which is marketing it primarily as a tool for creating technical illustrations. For this latest version of the program, ACD has slashed the price from almost £200 to just £90. That's quite a bargain – especially as the US price is still a hefty \$349 (around £196). However, it still leaves the question of who exactly Canvas is aimed at.

Although Canvas is now presented as primarily a technical illustration program, it includes a wide range of graphics tools, combining both vector and bitmap graphics and even a good selection of photo-editing, animation and desktop publishing (DTP) features. We wouldn't recommend it as a graphics program for home users – the sheer range of tools crammed into it makes Canvas a little too complicated – but for business users it represents a very affordable alternative to other graphics suites such as the more expensive CorelDraw.

When you launch the program its Start screen asks you what type of document you want to create. The options here reflect the program's wide range of graphics tools, and include vector-based



Canvas X is described as a technical illustration program, but it also includes a wide range of bitmap, photo-editing and DTP tools

illustrations, DTP publications, animations and custom documents, where you can freely mix and match different types of graphics. It also has a small selection of templates for creating documents such as calendars, business brochures and presentation slides. Acknowledging the possible confusion that can arise here, the Start screen also allows you to open a series of web-based tutorials designed to introduce the main graphics tools quickly and guide you through common tasks.

Once you've selected the type of document you want to work with, you enter the main workspace where all the different vector and bitmap graphics tools are available. These include simple lines and arrowheads for drawing flow charts, sophisticated text layout and formatting features for DTP work, a variety of photographic

filters and special effects and, of course, vector drawing tools for technical illustrations and business graphics. If that all sounds a little daunting there's a helpful context-sensitive Assistant palette that automatically provides information about any tool you select.

To emphasise its jack-of-all-trades status, Canvas can import around 100 different graphics file formats. It also provides a rather unusual printer driver option. Once installed, this driver appears in all the other applications on your computer and allows them to convert their own documents to Canvas format so that you can edit them in Canvas.

Given this almost bizarre degree of flexibility, it makes sense for ACD to concentrate on the program's technical illustration tools and simply treat its DTP and bitmap graphics tools as an added bonus. Viewed in that way, Canvas represents excellent value for business users who need to produce technical illustrations, diagrams and other types of business graphics.

Cliff Joseph



Enormous range of features at a very competitive price



A graphical jack-of-all-trades, but a master of none

REQUIREMENTS Windows 2000 or XP, 500MHz processor, 128MB RAM

HOTLIST CREATIVE & DESIGN SOFTWARE

ADOBE
Creative Suite 2

RATING ★★★★★

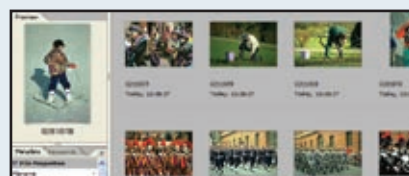
PRICE Standard edition £786 inc VAT (upgrade £375); Premium edition £1,040 inc VAT (upgrade £500)

SUPPLIER Adobe 0131 458 6842

DETAILS www.adobe.co.uk

Creative Suite 2 is a superb bundle of high-end products, including Photoshop, InDesign and Live Trace. Each product's features complement each other and they are all neatly tied together under a single interface. Each application also features a range of new tools, such as Photoshop's Vanishing Point tool, that makes photo editing in perspective much easier. This suite is great value compared to the standalone prices.

REQUIREMENTS Windows 2000 or XP with QuickTime 6.5, 500MHz processor (1GHz recommended), 384MB RAM (1GB recommended), 2.5GB disk space



HOTLIST WEB DESIGN SOFTWARE

MACROMEDIA
Dreamweaver 8

RATING ★★★★★

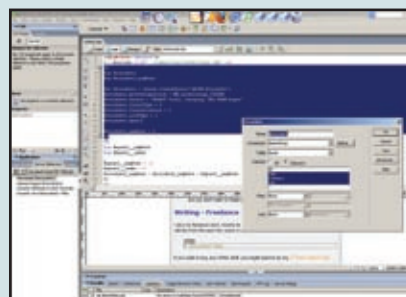
PRICE £400 inc VAT

SUPPLIER Macromedia Direct 0131 458 6766

DETAILS www.macromedia.com

If you have anything to do with developing professional websites, Dreamweaver 8 is the best £400 you'll ever spend. Miles ahead of the competition, it has everything. Whether you design the look of a site or incorporate dynamic data, Dreamweaver has the tools you need. It's too expensive for the home user, though.

REQUIREMENTS Windows 2000/XP, 800MHz processor, 256MB RAM, 650MB disk space, 1,024x768-pixel display



HOTLIST HOSTING PACKAGE

1AND1
Microsoft Home

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £5.86 per month, £70 a year

DETAILS www.1and1.co.uk

If you want to run a website above and beyond the simple web space that you get with your ISP, you'll need a dedicated hosting package such as 1and1's Microsoft Home. You get 800MB of web space, 10GB of data transfers a month, a free .co.uk domain name and 300 email addresses. This web hosting pack, with its simple control panel and bundled scripts, is excellent value.

REQUIREMENTS Internet access, web browser





REVIEW PHOTO-EDITING SOFTWARE

ADOBE
Elements 4.0

RATING ★★★★★

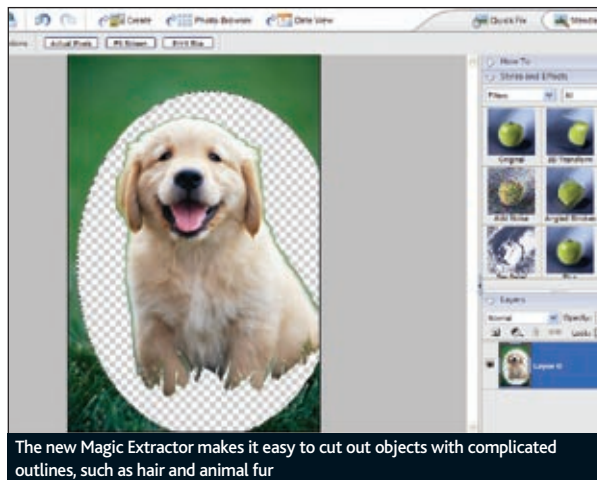
PRICE £68 inc VAT (upgrade £58)

SUPPLIER www.microanvika.comDETAILS www.adobe.co.uk

The market for photo-editing software is ridiculously competitive at the moment, and numerous software companies are falling over themselves to upgrade their editing programs in time for Christmas. However, this latest upgrade should ensure that Adobe's Photoshop Elements remains the leader of the pack.

This fairly hefty upgrade fine-tunes and improves many of the program's existing editing tools as well as adding some entirely new features. The red-eye removal tool now works automatically and can remove red-eye from pictures as you import them from your camera or hard disk. The slideshow options have also been enhanced, enabling you to add zoom and pan effects and a number of new transitions. We were also pleased to see that the program seemed noticeably faster and more responsive.

But it's the new features that we're all interested in, and these certainly don't disappoint. The list of entirely new features is relatively short, but there are some real showstoppers among them. One new feature is particularly remarkable: you can tell Photoshop Elements to sort through an entire group of photos and locate just the pictures that



The new Magic Extractor makes it easy to cut out objects with complicated outlines, such as hair and animal fur

have people's faces in them. It then displays a close-up of each face so that you can label each photo with a tag such as 'family' or 'friends'. This makes it easy to organise your photos so that you can find pictures of specific people really quickly.

Two other features also throw down the gauntlet to Adobe's rivals. Most photo-editing programs include some sort of magic selection tool that helps you select an object with a complicated outline, so that you can cut it out from the photo and save it on its own or superimpose it on another image. However, Photoshop Elements' Magic Extractor works better than anything we've seen so far. You start by quickly drawing a rectangle or oval around the object you want to select. Another window opens showing a close-up of the selected object, and you

simply mark a few points on the object with the foreground pen. This enables Elements to extract the object – lifting it away from its background – so you keep only the object and lose the surrounding background. We tried this with one particular image that we'd been having problems with and it worked first time. This sort of feature justifies the price of the upgrade all by itself.

Elements also includes a variation on this feature called the Magic Selection Brush. This allows you to select objects quickly within a photo, rather than removing them from the photo, so you can edit those objects without

altering the rest of the image.

The impressive thing about these new features is not just that they work so well, but that they're also very easy to use. It's this combination of power and ease of use that gives Photoshop Elements the edge over its many rivals, and this upgrade should make sure that it retains that edge for the next year or so.

Cliff Joseph

✓ Provides impressive photo-editing tools while retaining admirable ease of use

✗ Clunky online help system

REQUIREMENTS Windows XP, 800MHz processor, 256MB RAM, 800MB disk space. **Product code** AD07071A

HOTLIST REMOTE CONTROL SOFTWARE

3AM LABS
LogMeIn

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE Free; Professional edition

\$13 (around £7) per month

SUPPLIER www.3amlabs.comDETAILS www.logmein.com

If you have ever needed to access your PC while you've been away, LogMeIn is just the software for you. The free version gives you full remote control of your PC over the internet and works brilliantly.

The Professional version adds support for file transfers and guest invitations, and lets you use email to send links to files on your PC. It's an excellent piece of software for anyone who does a lot of remote work.

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98 or above, Internet Explorer, broadband internet connection



HOTLIST WEB BROWSER

MOZILLA
Firefox 1.0

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE Free

SUPPLIER www.firefox.com

Firefox 1.0 is by far the best web browser we've ever used. Introducing advanced features such as tabbed browsing and support for RSS feeds, it is leaps and bounds ahead of Internet Explorer. When you also consider that it's better at rendering pages and is free, there's little excuse not to use it.

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98 or above, 500MHz Pentium processor, 128MB RAM, 52MB disk space



HOTLIST UTILITIES SUITE

SYMANTEC
SystemWorks 2005

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £45 inc VAT

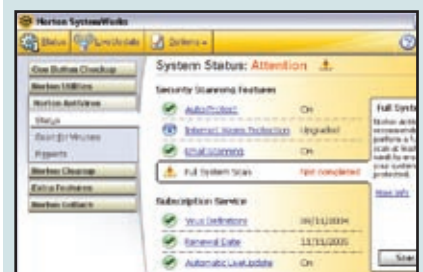
SUPPLIER Symantec 01628 592222

DETAILS www.symantec.co.uk

Keeping your PC running properly is a difficult task made a lot easier by SystemWorks. A One Button Checkup feature gives your PC a thorough examination and fixes any problems it comes across.

With Norton AntiVirus to protect your PC and GoBack 4.0 to make regular backups, PC woes can be fixed quickly and efficiently.

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98 or above, 180MB disk space, IE 5.5 or above. **Product code** B0002TS22Y





REVIEW NAVIGATION SOFTWARE

MICROSOFT
Autoroute 2006

RATING Software only ★★★★★

With GPS receiver ★★

PRICE £45 inc VAT (software only), £150 inc VAT (with USB GPS receiver)

SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.ukDETAILS www.microsoft.com/autoroute

There are a number of decent GPS systems on the market, and now Microsoft has joined the fray with a new version of Autoroute, which supports GPS navigation and is available with a USB GPS receiver.

Carrying a notebook in the car with you may seem slightly inconvenient, so Autoroute 2006 is also shipped with cut-down versions for Pocket PC and Windows Smartphone. Even so, only a PC's large screen can do the excellent mapping software justice. It covers the whole of Western Europe, and the maps are very clear. You can search for individual roads and attractions such as the Brandenburg Gate or Blackpool Tower, and the software moves the map there in under a second.

However, Autoroute 2006 is essentially a navigation aid. The Route Planner works well, working out complicated routes almost instantly, but the main change with the 2006 version is the inclusion of GPS navigation. We tested the software by taking a notebook on the road.

The receiver found a GPS signal very quickly, but the navigation software was appalling. The instructions were often unclear (telling us to "go on to ramp" as we approached two ramps, one going up and one going down) and when we missed a turning the software refused to recalculate, simply complaining that we were "off route" all the time. It is possible to force the software to re-route from your current position, but the recalculation was so slow that we were hopelessly lost by the time it had finished thinking.

Microsoft's Autoroute 2006 is good value as a comprehensive map of Europe, but the GPS navigation feels unfinished and is hopelessly out of its depth compared with any other system.

Chris Fিন্নamore



Extensive and clear mapping



Dreadful GPS navigation

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98/ME/2000/XP, Pentium II processor, 128MB RAM, 500MB disk space. **Product code** B000BH2AE6



For maps of Europe, Autoroute 2006 is on the right track, but it has lost its way where GPS navigation is concerned

REVIEW MUSIC PRODUCTION SOFTWARE

SONY
Acid Music Studio 6

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £49 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.scvlondononline.co.ukDETAILS www.sonymediasoftware.com

When we reviewed Acid Music Studio 5 a year ago we found that its sample manipulation tools were better than ever but its new MIDI-editing facilities were let down by a lack of ASIO drivers (for low-latency monitoring) and a lack of support for VST plug-ins.

Version 6 addresses both these criticisms. Adding ASIO, VST instrument and VST effect support hasn't been hard – all three appear in the £199 Acid Pro 5. However, when used with a MIDI keyboard and an ASIO-compatible sound card, Acid Music Studio 6 is a vast improvement over its predecessor. The delay between pressing a key and hearing a sound can be reduced to just a few milliseconds, and MIDI sound sources now include a vast range of VST instruments, including plenty of free ones, rather than just the dull General MIDI synth in version 5.

You can now process MIDI synths and audio tracks with either Acid's own bank of basic effects or VST plug-ins, the latter providing massive scope for unusual and interesting sounds. However, you can't set various synths and audio tracks to use the same effects. As a result, you'll quickly run out of processing power if, for example, you want to add reverb to a handful of sounds, as you'd need to set up a separate reverb plug-in for each. As each sample appears on its own track (a key feature for Acid's ease of use), it's easy for the track – and hence plug-in – count to get quickly out of hand.

Even so, Acid Music Studio remains fun, inspiring and easy to use, and VST support makes the end results sound considerably better than before. As a musical sketch pad for those who are put off by the price and complexity of programs such as Cubase or Sonar, it's an excellent choice.

Ben Pitt

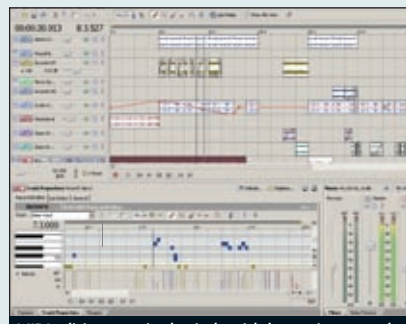


ASIO and VST support make it a much more rounded audio and MIDI sequencer



Mixing is still basic

REQUIREMENTS Windows 2000/XP, 800MHz processor, 256MB RAM, 200MB disk space. **Product code** SAMS6000



MIDI editing remains basic, but it's better integrated with Acid's excellent loop-manipulation tools

REVIEW BUSINESS SOFTWARE

BARCLAYS
Business Manager

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE From £23 inc VAT per month with a Barclays account

SUPPLIER Clearly Business 08456 015962

DETAILS www.clearlybusiness.com

Barclays' Business Manager is designed to help you manage your business's finances. The company has gathered together all the leading finance packages into one bundle, including Business Planner Pro, Sage Payroll and a choice of either Intuit's QuickBooks or Sage's Line 50 account management software. You'll find a full list on Barclays' website.

If you have a Barclays business account, the software costs £25 a month, for which you get around £2,000 worth of software. You can get the software – including a boxed product and CD with all the applications – from your local Barclays branch, backed up by Barclays' technical support.

Barclays has written its own automated installer, which mostly worked well. However, after a Sage installation forced our PC to reboot it took a while to coax the installer into finding the CD to install other applications.

Once installed, applications are accessed only through the Business Manager. This groups applications together into logical categories including Manage Finances and Manage Staff. Business Manager also includes loads of helpful guides on such subjects as recovering unpaid debt and the importance of good customer service. These will be most useful to novices looking to start a business, but the information is well thought out.

All the applications are full, unlocked versions, but they require a valid licence to work. If you cancel your subscription they become read-only, so you can view your old files but not edit them.

There's no minimum contract, although the software is much better value if you bank with Barclays. With everything you need for your business, tied together with a neat front end, this is excellent value for the small business.

David Ludlow



Excellent value; large range of applications



Can't buy online; temperamental installer

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98 or above, 128MB RAM, 650MB disk space



The Business Manager gives you access to all your applications and provides practical business advice



REVIEW AUDIO EDITOR

SONY

Sound Forge Audio Studio 8

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £49 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.scvlondononline.co.ukDETAILS www.sonymediasoftware.com

An audio-editing program is a bit like a screwdriver – not much fun by itself, but an indispensable tool when performing a variety of tasks. It's ideal for making your own samples or sound effects for music or video production projects, and it comes into its own for making finished mixes sound big and polished.

This cut-down version of Sound Forge 8 (reviewed in *What's New, Shopper*, August 2005) offers much of what makes its pricier sibling great. Its basic editing tools are precise and efficient, and it adds support for DirectX and VST plug-in effects, broadening the software's sonic palette enormously. A range of excellent tutorials has also been added to help new users get the most from the software.

There are still some compelling reasons to spend £199 on the full version, though. For one, it allows users to chain plug-ins together and automate their settings, and comes with CD Architect 5 for precise control over audio CD creation. It also has superior pitch shift, reverb and compression effects, although with VST support, Audio Studio users won't be short of high-quality effects, many of which are free.

However, the biggest limitation of this cut-down version is that it supports files up to only 48KHz and 16-bit. This means it is fine with CD-quality audio, but as even low-cost music production software such as Cubase SE supports 24-bit files, it would be necessary to bounce down to 16-bit in order to open them in Audio Studio.

Even so, a 16-bit stereo editor is much better than no stereo editor, and Sound Forge Audio Studio is far more powerful than the free Audacity program. If £199 is beyond your budget and you're prepared to work around the 16-bit limitation, you'll find plenty of power here.

Ben Pitt

✓ Third-party plug-in support boosts capabilities massively

✗ No 24-bit file support

REQUIREMENTS Windows 2000/XP, 500MHz processor, 128MB RAM, 150MB disk space. **Product code** SFAS8000



VST plug-in support means Audio Studio is no longer limited to its serviceable but uninspiring built-in effects

REVIEW MEDIA SUITES

AHEAD

Nero 7 Premium

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £50 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.ukDETAILS www.nero.com

ROXIO

Easy Media Creator 8 Suite

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £47 inc VAT

SUPPLIER <http://uk.insight.com>DETAILS www.roxio.co.uk

There was a time when Nero and Easy CD Creator could only burn CDs. Now, if you need to do anything with an optical disc, audio, image or video file, these suites probably cover it. Creative applications such as video and photo editing are fairly basic compared with dedicated software, but as general introductions to the joys of modern computing these suites are tremendous value, and their presentation is generally first rate.

Nero 7 Premium's 15 programs cover CD and DVD burning, video editing, DVD-Video authoring, copying and playback, photo viewing and editing, backup, audio editing, music production, disc label design, packet writing, a Universal Plug and Play (UPnP) media-streaming server and two new applications. Nero Scout is a media-cataloguing tool that organises music by artist, album or genre and videos and photos by folder or date. This is unusual in that it appears in My Computer for quick access from any program – in theory, at least. In practice we found it slow and unreliable.

Nero Home is Ahead's answer to Windows Media Center Edition, presenting audio, video and photos in an armchair-friendly interface. However, for some reason it plays two audio tracks or video soundtracks simultaneously when the user skips from one to another, which we found very odd.

We were amazed to find that Nero's DVD-authoring tool can encode 5.1-surround Dolby Digital soundtracks, as this feature is rare even in high-end video software. However, using it is convoluted, as only the music programs and not the video-editing application can mix in surround sound; finished mixes are imported from the former into the latter. This makes it nigh on



Nero Home is Ahead's impersonation of Windows Media Center, but it's by no means as slick



Roxio Creator can convert MP3 and photo collections to DVD-Video format for your set-top player

impossible to create surround effects that sync with video, but it does mean that musicians who want to experiment with surround sound can distribute their mixes cheaply. They'll probably want a more capable audio sequencer than Nero's to compose with, though.

ROXIO EASY MEDIA CREATOR

Roxio Creator 8 Suite offers a similar set of functions across its 13 programs, the only exceptions being that there's no equivalent of Nero Home and no music-production software. However, it has its own set of interesting features. It can guide you through the process of converting your vinyl collection to CD or MP3, and will even fill in the track details by analysing the audio and consulting an online database. More often than not, this actually worked when we tested it. We also like the ability to convert MP3 collections to DVD-Video format for the living room, using Dolby Digital encoding (stereo only) to fit around 35 albums on a 4.7GB disc.

Roxio VideoWave has never been our favourite video-editing application, but it's more usable than Nero's and fine for casual use. This latest version supports widescreen formats and DivX export, while its DVD authoring has gone to make way for Sonic MyDVD, a new arrival in the suite. MyDVD 8 has been completely overhauled and is more versatile than previous versions.

We didn't expect to find support for high-definition (HD) video, but both packages can handle footage from HDV cameras. However, only Nero can export HD, either as WMV or MPEG-4, although Creator can make DivX HD photo slideshows. Either way, anyone who's willing to spend more than £1,000 on an HDV camera will want a serious video-editing application to match, and these don't cut it.

Nero and Creator are such sprawling entities that it's hard to generalise. Nero Scout and Home look promising, but until their teething problems are sorted out, Roxio's more conventional Media Manager does a better job of organising and accessing large media collections. Nero's surround sound and HD support is astounding at this price, but who really needs it? Both packages have plenty going for them, but even we long-term Nero users found Roxio Creator more appealing.

Ben Pitt

REQUIREMENTS Roxio: Windows 2000 SP4/XP SP2, 1.6GHz processor for all features, 256MB RAM, 1GB disk space, DirectX 9 graphics card. **Product code** 223300UK. **Nero:** Windows 98/Me/2000 SP4/XP SP2, 1.6GHz processor for all features, 128MB RAM, 600MB disk space, DirectX 9 graphics card. **Product code** AHE033